DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 185 992 IR 008 323

AUTHOR Custer, Benjamin A.
TITLE The View from the Editor's Chair: Dewey Decimal Classification 16 to 19.
PUB DATE Aug 79
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Conference of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (45th, Copenhagen, Denmark, August 27-September 1, 1979).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Books; Cataloging; *Classification; *History; Libraries; *Library Collections; *Library Materials; *Library Technical Processes
IDENTIFIERS *Dewey Decimal Classification

ABSTRACT

The retiring editor of Dewey Decimal Classification recounts the development of the system from the 16th through the 19th editions, i.e., 1956-1980. During this period, the system has undergone major changes to internationalize its character. Special provisions have been incorporated for branches of history, geography, language, literature, the arts, philosophy, and religion that were of little or no concern to American libraries in 1876, and detailed tables of areas, and of racial, ethnic, and national groups have been added. International cooperative and consultative arrangements have been established and maintained in matters of editorial policy. Modernization has resulted in both substantive and organizational changes. Substantive improvements include the reexamination and reclassification in such areas as women, sex, ethnicity, and religion. Organizational improvements have moved the system from a series of pigeonholes to a rational coherent structure characterized by subject integrity and predictable subject relationships. The paper concludes with a series of anecdotes recalling some of the frustrations and rewards of editorial direction. (RAA)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED185992

IFLA Council 1979

Division: Bibliographic Control

Section: Classification Round Table

19|CLAS|1E

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

The View from the Editor's Chair

Dewey Decimal Classification 16 to 19

by

Benjamin A. CUSTER

Editor, Dewey Decimal Classification

and

Chief, Decimal Classification Division

The Library of Congress

Washington, D.C., U.S.A.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Carol Kucen Henry

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

IR000323

I. Introduction

This will not be a learned, expository, or argumentative paper on the theory and practice of making classification systems or of using them. Instead, I have been asked to give you a personal view of the Dewey Decimal Classification as seen from the editor's chair over a period of nearly a quarter of a century. This appears to me to be fitting in view of the fact that my retirement is expected to take place early in 1980, shortly after publication in 1979 of the two most recent editions of the Classification, the 19th full edition in June and the 11th abridged edition in December. Since this is a personal view, nothing that I shall say necessarily reflects the views or position of the Library of Congress, by which I am employed, of the Forest Press, or of the Decimal Classification Editorial Policy Committee.

Like most users of libraries in the English-speaking world, long before I became its editor I saw the Decimal Classification at work in public, secondary school, and college libraries. My first intensive exposure to it, however, was during my year of graduate professional studies, 1931/32, when, along with a hundred other students, I deciphered the mysteries of 327, 948.9, and 822.33. I remember returning to school after Christmas holiday that year and being told in hushed voice by a member of the library school faculty that the patron saint of librarianship, Melvil Dewey, had died on December 26th, just a few days past his eightieth birthday. Though it is less true now, during the first decade of my tenure as editor Dewey the man was a living presence in our daily work, often invoked to prove a point in contention; either we said, "Melvil would consider this innovation totally unacceptable," or we said, "Grandfather [our occasional pet name for him] was a great innovator, and he would heartily favor this new idea."

Needless to say, I never met Dewey, but I did one time see Dorkas Fellows, editor from 1921 to 1937. This was at an American Library Association conference in 1936 or 7, and to me, a graceless young barbarian of 24 or 5, she appeared to be an incredibly ancient lady. Since she died in 1938 aged 65, and I am now approaching 68, I must admit that time changes perspective!

I never actually applied the DDC to books until 1946-56 when I went to the Detroit Public Library as director of processing, in which capacity I supervised its application by others. I am embarrassed to say that I even recommended to the library director that we reclassify to the Library of Congress system, but he wisely overruled me. (This was before it became so fashionable in the 1960s for American libraries to convert from DC to LC; I shall return to that topic later.) It was during those ten years in Detroit that I became very active in the

the American Library Association, and consequently had various official contacts with DC personalities, such as Advisory Committee chairwoman Janet S. Dickson, Forest Press president Godfrey Dewey, son of Melvil, and editor David J. Haykin. In 1953 I attended the DC Editorial Policy Committee meeting that decided that the Library of Congress should assume editorial responsibility for the system, and back in 1949 I was a member of the ALA board that was threatened with lawsuit for daring to question Milton J. Ferguson's fitness to be the editor. (I should point out that Ferguson was editor of the disastrous 15th edition; Haykin was my predecessor as editor of the 16th, and I shall pay tribute to him later.)

Finally, in 1956, I myself was named editor, and in 1980 I shall become ex-editor, or perhaps editor emeritus. The story of those years, as well as the years from 1873 onward when the DDC was edited by Dewey himself, by May Seymour, by Dorkas Fellows, and by others, is admirably set forth with full documentation in John P. Comaromi's absorbing work, The Eighteen Editions of the Dewey Decimal Classification, published by the Forest Press in 1976. What I want to do today is to dwell on certain events and trends in my own 1956-80 period. I shall call these Cosmopolitanization, Modernization, Frustrations, Satisfactions, Personalities, and The Light Side.

II. Cosmopolitanization

In its earliest years the Dewey Decimal Classification was almost wholly oriented to the literature likely to be acquired by American academic libraries (such as Melvil Dewey's own Amherst) and public libraries, to serve the reading interests of a 19th century community inhabited by white Anglo-Saxon Protestant gentlemen many of whom read Latin and Greek, often also French and German, but who did not dream that anything of cultural or scientific value could be published in Russian, and had never heard of Tamil or Ibo; who, like Dr. Samuel Johnson, always equated religion with the Christian religion, and usually the Christian religion with Protestantism. In those early days, and, indeed, up through the 15th edition of 1951, even though the internationally oriented UDC was launched in 1895, Dewey and his successors appear not to have realized fully just how successfully the DDC had invaded the international library scene and just how great a need there was for the Classification to divest itself of its parochialism if it was to meet the needs of an increasing fraction of its users.

It has been my pleasure to participate in a major effort to internationalize the system, increasingly through four editions, 16 to 19, with the results plain to see as the proportion of sales outside

North America has soared to 25, to 33, to 40, and now to almost 50 percent of the total. Supported by the findings of various surveys of the use of the DDC, in the British Isles by the Library Association, in Asia and Africa by the Forest Press-American Library Association sponsored Field Survey, and in Latin America by the Organization of American States, we have slowly eased the way for libraries that needed special provisions and shorter numbers for the branches of history, geography, language, literature, the arts, philosophy, and religion that had been of little or no concern to the American library users of 1876. We have introduced the detailed tables of areas and of racial, ethnic, and national groups. And, perhaps most important, we have extended the bonds of international cooperation and appreciation, through meetings such as this one, through exchange of operating personnel, through inclusion on our Editorial Policy Committee of librarians from other lands, through frequent and frank exchanges of views on specific classification issues with classifiers in other countries, through development of expansions that have made the DDC acceptable for use as the organizing principle of many national bibliographies in countries that do not follow the American custom of preferring their bibliographies alphabetically arranged under specific subject headings.

One of the most rewarding bonuses of this cosmopolitanizing effort has been the many professional and personal friends I have made in other continents than my own, who in turn have enabled me to meet in their own homes with Australians, with Brazilians, with Britons, with Germans, with Greeks, with Indians, with Kenyans, with Norwegians, with Pakistanis, and to learn to know more than just the surface of their countries.

III. Modernization

In like fashion, we have tried, through the course of the four full editions that I have edited, to bring the Classification itself into the modern world, both substantively and organizationally.

Among the substantive improvements, women are no longer classed as a custom in 396, but coequally with men as the two sexes sociologically considered in 305. American native races are no longer referred to by the to them distasteful name of Indians, and are no longer considered as a special topic of North and South American history, but are given the same treatment as any other race or ethnic group, no matter whether the considerations are political, economic, artistic, social, scientific, technical, or historical. The history of the Jews is no longer classed as part of their religion. There is substantial provision for topics in Roman Catholic Christianity, as well as for topics in Islam, Buddhism, and other religions. Homosexuality, which in the 14th edition was called a "vicious mania," is now a "sexual deviation," a type of sex relation, and a custom.

Among the organizational improvements, the system has been gradually developed from a series of "pigeonholes" for various subjects --the word is that used by Walter Stanley Biscoe, Melvil Dewey's associate -- to a rational and coherent structure characterized by subject integrity and predictable subject relationships; the concepts of citation order and facet analysis have been adopted and put increasingly to use; the index, from being a grab bag of terms directed only to those schedule numbers where the terms were named, has become a systematic structure that enables the thinking classifier to identify class numbers for tens of thousands of topics that could not be spelled out in full within limits less than encyclopedic.

IV. Frustrations

No work assignment, no matter how glamorous and enjoyable, lacks its frustations, and mine has been no exception. The frustrations have come from many sources.

Like anyone else, I enjoy praise better than adverse criticism. I basked under the favorable response to the 16th edition, and, since I knew that the 17th was an even better edition, it was a severe blow to me to find how many people disliked it. I thought the introduction was much better organized than its prdecessor, and found that many people could not understand it; I liked the edition's symmetry and simplicity, and was shocked to find that people were appalled by its starkness; I knew that the index was based on a brilliant idea (even though not very well executed for lack of time), and was horrified to learn that people considered it of no help whatever, if not actually a hindrance to proper use of the system, accused us of sabotaging it on purpose, and so panicked the Forest Press that it directed us, at a cost of close to $100,000 to prepare a second, tradition-bound, index. There was, however, one big satisfaction at the end: unpopular or not, 23% more copies were sold of the 17th edition than of the 16th, which had itself been the most successful edition in history.

The text of Edition 18 was completed in 1970, and it was expected that the set would be published early in 1971. Consequently, since the British National Bibliography wanted to begin to use this edition on 1 January 1971 to coincide with the start of a new publication cycle, it was decided against my better judgement that the Library

of Congress -- my office, in short -- would begin to use the forthcoming edition at the same time. Unfortunately, a series of events for which the editors were in no way responsible delayed publication until late 1971, and, in fact, no sets were in users' hands before January and February 1972. This meant that for over a year American (and British) libraries received Dewey numbers that in many cases they could not fully understand, and the scores of complaints that we received were indeed a source of frustration. Now we have the 19th edition, just published, which the Library of Congress as well as the national libraries of Canada and Australia will begin to use in January 1980; this time instead of advancing the British are delaying implementation for a full year, until January 1981. The experience with the 18th edition showed that an effort at overseas accommodation can in some cases create more ill will domestically than it creates of good will internationally!

This was equally true when, at British urging but with my full support, we relocated British and United Kingdom history from 942, where they had shared a number with English history for nearly 100 years, to 941. I think we did the right thing, but four years later American complaints are still coming in.

Still another frustration was the requirement through the 18th, but not the 19th, edition that we continue to display a residue of Melvil Dewey's peculiar spellings. I maintained strongly for nearly 20 years that the use of such spellings discouraged rather than encouraged international use because of the problems encountered by users, like many in my audience, to whom English is a second or third language. But Godfrey Dewey once said that he would rather see the DDC languish and wither away than not retain at least a sampling of his father's spellings, and it seemed only prudent, as long as Godfrey lived, to adhere to his wishes.

Another frustration came from the preparation of the abridged edition, which is intended mainly for small North American public and school libraries, and which traditionally was so designed that a small library growing larger could graduate from the abridged to the full edition merely by the addition of more digits to class numbers already in use. We had received many complaints about the awkward arrangements that often arose, especially when DC structure was irregular, for example at 948.1 for history of Norway, with 948.2-.4 instead of 948.12-.14 for history of subdivisions of Norway. Consequently, for the 10th abridged edition, which is the one now current, we decided to modify rather than strictly abridge, so that 948.1 would be used for the parts as well as for the whole of Norway. Hardly had this edition appeared than a new series of complaints arose: small libraries receiving computer-generated DDC numbers from processing centers, numbers arbitrarily cut down from full DC numbers, were unable to obtain the correct

numbers as provided by the 10th edition. Finally, frustrated by demands from both directions, we decided that Edition 11, which will be published a few months from now, will once again be a true abridgment. Libraries trying to follow the latest abridged DC will see a pendulum in operation: they will have classed the history of Oslo in 948.2, then in 948.1, then again in 948.2. My frustration only reflects that of the suffering librarians caught in the middle between two equally noisy sets of partisans!

Establishment of the Cataloging-in-Publication (CIP) program, which provides publishers with cataloging and classification information in advance of publication for inclusion in the books themselves, has provided us with an unending series of frustrations. The program was established nearly a decade ago with great fanfare, and was based on the premise that proof copies of the various works would be made available for cataloging purposes. It soon became clear that most publishers found this inconvenient, and so the standard procedure now is that the publisher supplies titles, perhaps a foreword or table of contents, and a brief description of what he or she considers the book to be about. As a result, and typically, we have received a score of scoldings from libraries at large for classing a spy novel titled Birds of Prey under zoology, even though the publisher provided not a single clue to the true nature of the work. When such errors are discovered we can at some expense correct the bibliographic records, but so long as any such book lasts on some library's or reader's shelf it will bear within it the wrong decimal number (and the wrong Library of Congress number and subject headings as well)!

I have already mentioned the American fashion of the 1960s to convert the classification of one's library from DC to LC. This fad was brought about by a variety of factors, some valid, some not. We may note that at the same time that a good many United States libraries were discontinuing their use of the DDC, international use was so increasing that sales of the past four editions (not counting the atypical 15th) look like this:

Edition 14, 1942, 16,000 copies sold
" " 16, 1958, 31,000 " " " ", an increase of 94%
" " 17, 1965, 38,000 " " " " " " " " 23%
" " 18, 1971, 55,000 " " " " " " " " 45%
Total increase of 18 over 14: 244%

It was frustrating enough to learn of first one library, then another, then many, abandoning the DC, though it cheered us up when the giant University of Illinois, America's third largest university library, announced that it would stay with us, but the really bitter pill that I

had to swallow was the countless letters, saying, in effect, "Dear Mr. Custer," or even "Dear Ben, We have decided to convert from Dewey to Library of Congress Classification. Please tell us how to go about it. Or, "Please supply us with a conversion table so we can turn all our DC numbers into LC numbers" with no expenditure of mental effort on our part!

This is an ideal job in which to encounter zealots and enthusiasts, usually people who have become convinced that the Dewey Decimal system gives their cause insufficient attention or improper placement. In recent years these have included, among others, supporters of osteopathic medicine, of handwriting analysis, and of the Bahai faith. Our frustration comes in being unable to explain the convolutions of classification structure in a way that will persuade these people that their particular field of interest is not being discriminated against, or to make it clear that the detail of development is based on the extent of the literature, in short, on literary warrant, rather than on theoretical considerations.

V. Satisfactions

But no matter how disgruntling, how humiliating, how depressing, how distasteful the frustrations, they cannot begin to equal the profound satisfactions of what must be one of the most interesting jobs in librarianship. The genuine pleasure that has come from seeing the advancing cosmopolitanization, purification, and regularization of the Classification cannot be fully realized by one who is not on the front line participating in the action. I think of the sense of accomplishment on the day that two assistants and I brainstormed the old "divide like" note into a new "add" note, and on the day that we worked out the structural concept of the index referring up to "other aspects" where the term being indexed is not named but is included by implication, e.g., Apples culture 634.11, food 641.3411, cookery 641.6411; other aspects see Rosaceae; also Fruits. Fruits as animal feeds 636.0874, commercial preservation 664.8, domestic preservation 641.41-.47. Rosaceae botany 583.372 etc.; other aspects see Plants. On each of those days I left the office in the afternoon as intoxicated as if I had partaken of too much akvavit.

I have already referred to the satisfaction of seeing the use of DC spread, from perhaps 20 countries in 1932 (the year I began to practice my profession), to at least 134 today, of watching its sales soar, from less than 10,000 of the 1932, or 13th, edition to around 55,000 of the 18th. To this may be added the pleasure of having the Classification adopted as the organizing principle by so many national bibliographies, even including, in my own country, the American Book Publishing Record.

As the UDC has become more rational and more firmly established, I have had the satisfaction of observing greatly improved personal relations in the Decimal Classification family, i.e., among the Forest Press, the Editorial Policy Committee, the Library of Congress administration, the users, and the editors. In my early days as editor the acrimony and tension at editorial planning meetings was unbelievable; had a match been lighted, the mix would have exploded. Nowadays all these groups meet and confer with mutual trust and respect, no matter how vigorous their disagreements. It certainly makes a difference to know that your product is alive and well and not about to draw its last breath!

VI. Personalities

Of course, the greatest satisfaction of all lies in the many wonderful people I have come to know, to respect, to admire, to call friend, to love.

Consider my immediate predecessor as editor, David J. Haykin. There, in a small but vibrant physical package, lived one of the most stimulating persons it has been my good fortune to know. Dave's mind ran so fast that his tongue could not keep up with it, and this sometimes complicated communication with him. But it was he to whom came more than to any other the modern vision of a modern DC for a modern age. He saw what really could be done with hierarchical structure In his scarcely two and a half years as editor, 1954-56, he generated most of the steam that made the 16th, the 17th, and the 18th editions the great ones that they were.

Then there was Godfrey Dewey, known to me as president of Forest Press until 1961 and as a member of the Decimal Classification Editorial Policy Committee until 1965. If I was a bit too young to meet Melvil, how fortunate I was to work with Godfrey instead! Let's face it honestly: Godfrey and I had some mighty arguments, which he always won, on such stylistic matters as punctuation and spelling. Godfrey was his father's son and shared many of his father's enthusiasms. But when it came to substantive issues in establishing DC policy, Godfrey was a solid and welcome force, sometimes balancing by his conservatism and strong personality a whole group of supporters of what, later, after reflection, would be seen to be unsound ideas. Providing as he did the only link with the founding father, he was a very necessary balance wheel to keep deliberations from suddenly running away from reality. No matter how vigorous the debate, and even though tempers sometimes frayed at the edges, Godfrey was always calm and good-humored. I miss him.

There have been two or three score of Forest Press and Editorial Policy Committee members over the years, of whom I shall name only Verner Clapp, a great friend of IFLA, and one of the true greats of librarianship, and four people present today, John Humphry, Doralyn Hickey, Frances Hinton your secretary, and Joel Downing your chairman.

There were also the persons of whom I became aware because of their criticisms of the DC, and who then became dear friends, people like Frances Hinton, just named, like Russell Sweeney, like Jack Wells.

There was Fremont Rider, a man much my senior in age, eminence, and venerability, who came some 500 kilometers from Connecticut to Washington just to take me out to a gourmet dinner and give me advance information on the imminent publication of his International Classification, the appearance of which he feared would hurt my feelings.

There were the two or three score of associates over a quarter century in the Decimal Classification Division itself. They may be to a large extent anonymous and shielded from public exposure, yet truly it is they who have done the work and who really deserve the credit for such success as we have had. Their names are unknown to most of you, and I shall mention only three current and most valuable aides, Melba Adams, Margaret Warren, and Winton Matthews, and a former aide whom three years ago I snatched from the staff and married, Emiko Hara Custer.

Then there were my several directors at the Library of Congress. I shall mention William J. Welsh and Joseph H. Howard, and then add a word about my first director, John W. Cronin. In the years when the editorial staff of five or six was working madly up to 90 hours a week toward what seemed an impossible deadline for DC 16, when DCEPC, Advisory Committee, Forest Press, and users were pulling the editor in all directions, no one was such a bulwark in a storm as John. Weekly and sometimes daily he listened to my problems, shouted commonsense advice as he pounded the table - as only John could pound - and inspired me to carry on. Never was there a librarian who gave more of himself to get things done, never a librarian with greater vision. I suspect that John is one of the greatest librarians of our time, as Melvil Dewey was of his.

You will forgive me if I pay tribute last to someone whom I knew long before I became Dewey's editor, my late wife, Arline Kern Custer, who at all times through the 16th, 17th and 18th editions, and until her death half way into the work on the 19th, drove me, led me, cajoled me, supported me, and inspired me. If you want to know what makes a man successful, look for the woman behind him.

VII. The Light Side

I should like to finish by telling you of a few of the amusing things that have lightened the view from the editor's chair.

There was Dewey's spelling of his own name. As you doubtless know, in his passion for efficiency he early in his career dropped permanently the use of his two middle names, he cut his first name down from Melville to Melvil, and for a few years reduced his surname from Dewey to Dui. The story may be apocryphal, but, since he reverted to the Dewey spelling just about the time he was married, it is said that when he asked Miss Annie Godfrey to share his life, his fortune, and his name, she agreed only upon condition that the name she shared with him take the familiar form used then and later by Admiral George, Philosopher John, and Governor Tom (none of whom, by the way, was related to Melvil). If this story is true, it was one of the few times in his life that Melvil Dewey met his match.

There was Rudolph Gjelsness, head of cataloging and classification at the University of Michigan library, who in the 1920s was turned down for the assistant editorship of the DDC by Dorkas Fellows because in his interview with her he had had the temerity to inquire about salary, whereas to her, in her devotion to the Old Man, the editorial task was sacred and money was of no consequence.

There were the pins or brooches announcing, after the poorly received 17th edition appeared, "Dewey is dead," and there were the T-shirts celebrating the Decimal Classification and American Library Association centennials, both in 1976, by asking, "Dewey?" and replying, "You bet we do!"

There was the personal copy of DC 17 sent to Father Timon Cook, OFM, in appreciation of his great assistance in supplying a Roman Catholic point of view in the revision for that edition of the 200s. For five years Fr. Cook's seminary refused to let him have possession of the set, even though his name was stamped on it in gold, because all Franciscans have taken the vow of poverty and may keep nothing of their own.

There was the visit to the office in 1956 by the librarian of Brigham Young University, a school in Utah founded by the Latter-Day Saints, or Mormons, who asked when the DC had relocated Mormonism from 298 among the non-Christian religions to 289.3 among the Christian denominations. (It may be necessary to remind you that in the 19th century most Americans looked with great suspicion, not to say disfavor, upon the Mormons, properly called the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, because of their early support of the practice of polygamy.)

I had to tell my visitor that Melvil Dewey's prejudices had not been overturned until the 12th edition of 1928, the editors of which finally recognized that, whatever its early social views, the Mormon Church was indeed Christian. I was then given the reason for the inquiry: the Latter-Day Saints had sent a troop to a Boy Scout jamboree in central Europe, and the boys were turned away from communion with all the others present on the grounds that they were not Christians, and the authority for this view was cited as being that world-famous reference book, the Dewey Decimal Classification!

There was the lecturer at the University of Hull in England who wrote or edited several books on antiquarian subjects, whose parents had named her Decima L. Douie, Decima Langworthy Douie, born 1901.

I remember how Newsweek, an American news magazine, printed the story that we had classed the book Sex and the College Girl in 301.4243, which, said Newsweek, was the number for prostitution! The editors of Newsweek did not realize that the meaning of that number had been expanded to cover all aspects of sex outside of marriage, and that the new expansion had been distributed free to thousands of purchasers of the DC. Needless to say, Newsweek's story was picked up by several other publications, all of which did their best to make the DDC look ridiculous.

Finally, I cannot resist telling you of the former staff member, now deceased, who was so incensed by an unfavorable review of the 17th edition in a British publication that, while visiting Britain, she threatened to sue the editor for defamation, and her son offered to punch the reviewer in the nose!

It has been a great 24 years, an unparalleled experience, and I certainly thank you for your courtesy in permitting me to share a few highlights with you.